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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing number of court-referred drug clients, there has been little systematic investigation into how these clients compare to non court-referred drug clients. This study investigates counselors' perceptions of their clients. It was hypothesized that court-referred clients would generally be perceived less favorably than non court-referred clients. A total of 56 practicing drug counselors completed the counselor questionnaire, which was designed especially for this study. Analyses revealed that drug counselors generally perceived court-referred clients less favorably than noncourt-referred clients. However, on some variables this pattern was significant only in regard to the beginning of counseling. This suggests counselors may see court-referred clients as at a disadvantage at the beginning of counseling, but able to "catch up" to their noncourt-referred counterparts by the time counseling is completed. If the perceptions outlined here are accurate, there are important differences between court-referred and non court-referred clients that perhaps should be addressed in counseling. Also, counselors who are not consciously aware of the general preference that seems to exist for non court-referred clients may unwittingly display preferential (or even prejudicial) treatment for one particular group of clients over the other. (JDM)

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Counselors' Perceptions of Court-Referred and Non Court-Referred Drug Clients

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Court-referred clients are those who are remanded to counseling because they are tied in some way to the criminal justice system; usually, this means that such clients have been convicted of an offense and are required to participate in counseling as part of their sentence (Boscarino, 1980). However, ordering clients to counseling has been seen by some as a strange marriage between two different (perhaps even opposing) systems. For example, Riordan and Martin (1993) have said, "Counseling and psychotherapy have historically been viewed by the criminal justice system as 'soft,' a place where one is forgiven. The courts are viewed as 'tough,' a place that does not tolerate excuses" (p. 375). Nevertheless, in the realm of drug abuse counseling, court-referred clients are quite common (Howard & McCaughrin, 1996). Indeed, due to increasingly stringent DUI and drug laws, the proportion of court-referred drug clients is increasing; recently, it was estimated that approximately 40% of drug counseling clients are court-referred (Howard & McCaugrin, 1996), compared with 23% in 1980 (Boscarino, 1980).

Despite the growing number of court-referred drug clients, there has been little systematic investigation into how these clients may compare to more traditional, non court-referred drug clients (i.e., those who enter drug counseling of their own volition or at the prompting of others such as family members, friends, or health professionals). The research that has been done on this topic has focused primarily on treatment outcome and the differences that may exist between court-referred and non court-referred clients in terms of counseling success. Unfortunately, the findings in this area have been highly inconsistent. For example, while Pompi and Resnick (1987) found that court-referred clients were more successful in counseling than non court-referred clients, Howard and McCaughrin (1996) reported just the opposite (i.e., that court-referred clients tend to be *less* successful than their non court-referred counterparts). A third study (McLellan & Druley, 1977) found no significant differences in counseling outcome

success between these two client groups. The discrepancies in these findings may be associated with the use of different measures of "successful outcome" across these studies (e.g., reducing one's use of drugs, abstaining from drug use, completing a treatment program).

Rather than focus on rates of outcome success, in the current study we chose to investigate a topic with clearer implications for the *process* of counseling, namely drug counselors' perceptions of court-referred and non court-referred clients. Although a few studies have examined counselors' perceptions of their clients (e.g., Tryon, 1992; Wachowiak & Diaz, 1987), the court-referred versus non court-referred dichotomy has not been systematically explored. Because literature comparing these two groups of clients is scant, predictions regarding how court-referred and non court-referred clients might be perceived in relation to one another were difficult to formulate. However, based on anecdotal reports suggesting that court-referred clients may be particularly difficult to work with (Lehmer, 1986; Riordan & Martin, 1993), it was hypothesized that these clients would generally be perceived less favorably than non court-referred clients.

A total of 56 practicing drug counselors took part in this study. Their mean age was 47.0 years and they had worked as counselors, on average, 11.7 years. The participants completed a 58-item Counselor Questionnaire (CQ) which was designed especially for the current study. Using primarily five-point Likert-type scales, the CQ assessed drug counselors' perceptions of court-referred and non court-referred clients on a number of personality, wellbeing, and attitudinal variables. To assess potential differences in the perceptions of the client groups at two critical points in treatment, several questionnaire items also asked counselors to rate client characteristics at both the beginning and the end of counseling. In addition, counselors were asked to provide some information about themselves and their experiences (e.g., age, sex,

amount of experience, proportion of time spent with court-referred and non court-referred clients).

Analyses of variance indicated that drug counselors generally perceived court-referred clients less favorably than non court-referred clients (see Table 1). However, on variables in which clients were evaluated at both the beginning and the end of counseling, non court-referred clients tended to be rated significantly more favorably at the beginning, but *not* at the end, of counseling (see Table 2). Additional analyses revealed that these patterns of results were not qualified by individual counselor characteristics relating to demographics and counseling experiences.

As hypothesized, the results reported here indicate that court-referred drug clients are seen more negatively by counselors than non court-referred drug clients. However, it should be noted that on some variables, this pattern of findings was statistically significant only in regard to the beginning of counseling. This suggests that counselors may see court-referred clients as at a disadvantage at the beginning of counseling but also somehow able to "catch up" to their non court-referred counterparts by the time counseling is completed (see Table 2). Moreover, this pattern of findings may help to explain the failure of outcome studies (Howard & McCaughrin, 1996; McLellan & Druley, 1977; Pompi & Resnick, 1987) to find a consistent pattern of differences involving these two client groups; indeed, those investigations concentrated on the *end* of counseling rather than examining the counseling process as a whole, including the beginning of counseling.

The present study is the first to systematically examine court-referred and non court-referred drug clients from the unique perspective of the counselor. While two clear patterns of findings emerged (see Tables 1 and 2), the results reported here also provide some potentially

important implications for the counseling process. For example, if the perceptions outlined here are accurate, there are important differences between court-referred and non court-referred clients that perhaps should be addressed in counseling. Also, counselors who are not consciously aware of the general preference that seems to exist for non court-referred clients may unwittingly display preferential (or even prejudicial) treatment for one particular group of clients over the other.

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Table 1

Counselors' Mean Ratings of the Personality and Wellbeing of Court-Referred and Non Court-Referred Drug Clients

Variable	Client Group		F (1, 55)
	CR	NCR	
Emotionally stable	2.08	2.37	8.54**
Conscientious	2.34	3.09	37.26***
Open to experience	2.13	3.02	34.14***
Agreeable	2.77	3.13	11.96**
Extraverted	3.07	2.95	.76
Optimistic	1.96	2.70	28.43***
Intelligent	3.43	3.66	5.54*
Severity of drug problem	3.96	2.95	64.43***
Physical health	2.83	3.16	10.53**
Mental health	2.59	2.96	18.15***
Good social support	1.74	2.73	47.83***
Stable job situation	1.98	2.97	38.43***

Note. CR refers to court-referred clients and NCR refers to non court-referred clients.
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 2

Counselors' Mean Ratings of the Characteristics of Court-Referred and Non Court-Referred Drug Clients at the Beginning and End of Counseling

Variable	Beginning of Counseling		End of Counseling		Time x Group
	CR	NCR	CR	NCR	F (1,55)
Angry	4.25_a	3.25_b	2.71_c	2.36_c	20.17**
Resistant	4.01_a	3.24_b	2.41_c	2.72_c	10.39**
Difficult to work with	3.51_a	3.02_b	2.62_{bc}	2.42_c	7.54*
Resentful of counseling	4.10_a	3.09_b	2.73_c	2.29_d	18.66***
Open to expressing emotion	1.80_a	2.57_b	3.32_c	3.77_c	5.12*
Motivated to stop using drugs	2.37_a	3.04_b	3.25_{bc}	3.62_c	3.97*
In denial about drug problem	4.08_a	3.58_b	2.67_c	2.44_c	4.03*

Note. Means in the same row with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$ as determined by Tukey post-hoc tests. CR refers to court-referred clients and NCR refers to non court-referred clients.
*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$